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## A Realist Philosophical Approach for Housing Research: Critical Realism

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### ABSTRACT

*The development of housing studies as an academic discipline from its roots in the 1970s has seen research undertaken into a range of phenomena associated with housing, home and society. Different philosophical approaches have been adopted by housing researchers in their studies to help them to carry out their explorations, examinations and investigations. This article presents an analysis of one philosophical approach which can help the housing researcher in their quest for knowledge. It looks at the philosophy of critical realism (CR), the relationship that it has with housing studies and how it can be used as an approach within housing research. Three core aspects are looked at through three parts within the article. The first part provides an introduction to CR, describing key aspects and highlighting fundamental parts of the philosophical approach. The second part of the article considers the role of philosophy in relation to research and the overall approaches that underlie philosophical approaches. The third part of the article focuses on realism in housing research and compares social constructionist and CR approaches within this philosophical tradition in relation to their appropriateness for research within the field of housing studies. At the end of the article the main strands are brought together in a concluding section.*

**Keywords:** *philosophy, critical realism, social constructionism, housing; research*

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### INTRODUCTION

CR offers the researcher an approach that allows them to apply a theory of reality that enables the subject matter being explored to be analyzed. This philosophy provides analytical tools which allow the researcher to look at the drivers and other factors that impact upon the subject matter. This is through the perspective of a stratified ontological approach. It is claimed by Bhaskar [1] that knowledge of the social world is a product of the social, historical, and political conditions in which it operates. The existence of an

objective material world is acknowledged by the researcher, as well as a socially constructed world in which individuals co-exist with each other to forming bonds and relationships from which structures in society develop. Lawson [2] states that these structures differ in form, rules, and processes which govern how they operate as well as their interaction with ‘actors with agency’. The nature of structure impacts on the agency of actors and vice versa with new aspects, activities, events, and change emerging from these interactions. The complexities that

influence these changes are driven and caused by mechanisms that lie beneath the surface. Lawson [3] asserts that CR provides ‘an ontological theory for abstracting causal mechanisms’ that can help with the development of an understanding of these emerging change elements.

## **PART ONE: THE PHILOSOPHY OF CRITICAL REALISM (CR)**

CR has evolved from the work of Bhaskar, [4–8] and has developed as a philosophical approach in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Prominent academics across a number of disciplines have contributed to the development of this philosophy such as Collier [9] in the field of philosophy, Archer [10–14] and Sayer [15–18] in the fields of sociology. CR has become increasingly used as a framework for undertaking investigations in different discipline areas including nursing [19–21], management [22], social work [23] and housing research [24]. In CR, both the natural world and the social worlds are recognized, and these are explored in different ways [25]. The world of the natural is researched using empirically based methodologies that measure, experiment and analyze, but investigations into the world of the social, cannot apply these approaches in the same way. The social world does not function in the same way as the world of nature. Schostak [25] states that to investigate and study the social world that is made up of agents who construct/de-construct their reality constantly, methods of measurement have ‘to be re-thought for applicability in the social worlds of people’. Prout [26] identifies that the approach should also be conducive to the heterogeneous nature of social relations within society. Bhaskar takes the view that from a realist ontological perspective, the complexities in social relations within society show both identifiable independence of both people

and society as well as their interdependence on each other.

### **Stratified Reality**

CR views reality as ‘a stratified, open system of emergent entities’ [27] which means that things can happen that make a difference in the world, but they are related to the environment that they are in or the conditions that surround them. To view how things can happen, CR uses a stratified ontology which divides reality into three differentiated layers. These three layers were called domains by Bhaskar [28], and labelled as the empirical, the actual, and the real. O’Mahoney and Vincent, clarify how the CR approach to ontology differs from the positivist position, which ‘equates reality with recordable events’ and the social constructionist position which ‘collapses ontology to discourse’. Sayer differentiates the stratified ontology of CR compared to other ontologies, ‘which have flat ontologies populated by either the actual or the empirical, or a conflation of the two. In contrast to these other ontologies where only the observable exists, CR has at the level of the real, the structures and objects that are hidden and whose powers can be released to generate events. The three layers within CR show things happening and how they happen. Specific terms are employed to describe these aspects and to relate them to each domain. Table 1 identifies each domain, the aspect associated with it, the specific term assigned and a definition.

At the level of the real exist social structures (a group of objects) or objects which have causal powers. These powers are released through the activation of mechanisms at the level of the actual that cause events to happen, and the experience of these events is at the level of the empirical.

**Table 1. Ontological levels and defined terms in CR.**

Domain	Aspect	Term	Term Definition
Empirical	What has happened and was experienced or perceived	Event	Things that happen [29], things that occur, things that are visible and things that are experienced/perceived
Actual	How or what caused the happening to happen	Mechanism	A process in a concrete system that makes it what it is [30] Ways of acting of things [28] Triggers that cause things to happen Central to the philosophy of CR [31]
Real	Conditions or environment that enable the happening to be triggered	Structure	Sets of internally related objects or practices [16]

**Table 2. A comparison of labels used by CR researchers [4, 16, 17, 28, 32, 33]**

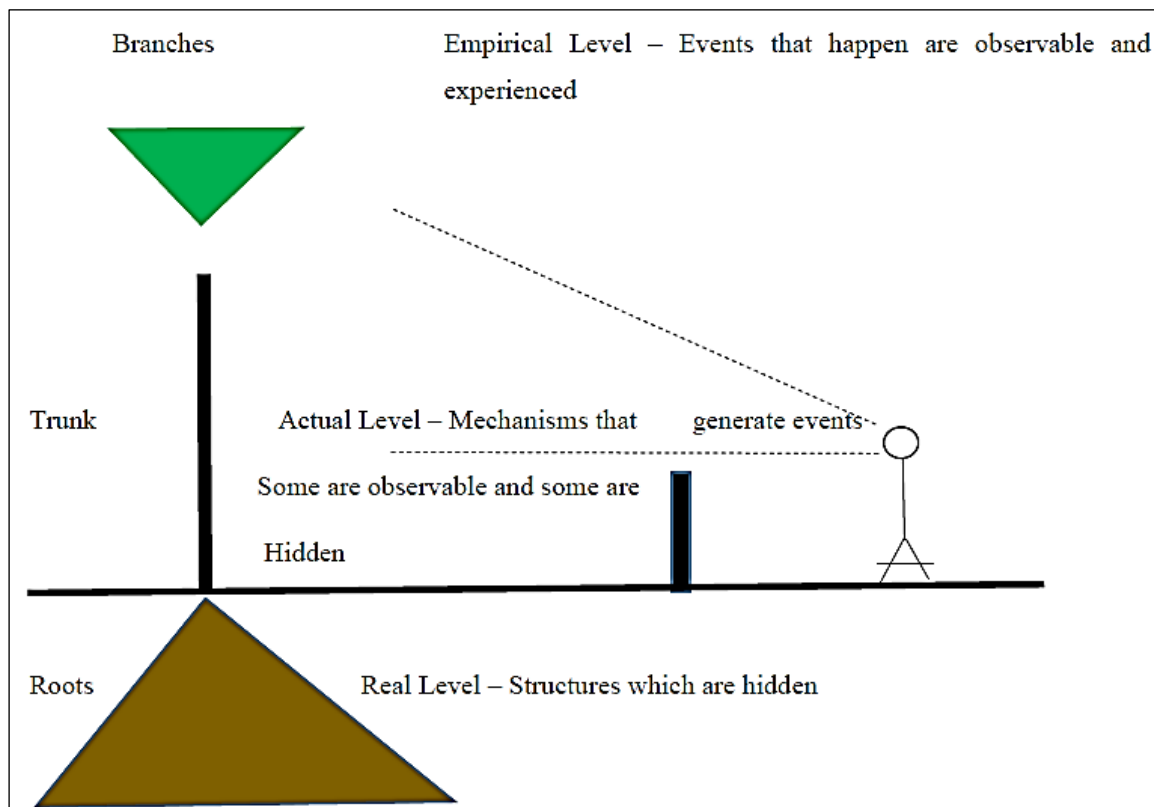
Domain	Bhaskar	Sayer	Mingers and Wilcocks	Smith and Johnston
Empirical	Experiences	Events	Events	Events (Experienced)
Actual	Events	Mechanisms	Events / Non-Events / Mechanisms	Events / Non-Events
Real	Mechanisms	Structures	Mechanisms / Structures	Mechanisms / Structures

Social structures at the level of the real are hidden, some mechanisms at the level of the actual are hidden, and some are observable, whereas most experiences and the level of the empirical are observable. Although structures are hidden, at the level of the real, their effects can be seen or interpreted at the level of the empirical. The language employed by Bhaskar and other CR writers, use different labels can be used to describe the domains and what is within them. An example of this is shown in Table 2.

In this article, the language and interpretation of the three domains by Sayer are adopted. This is so that only one set of terms are usable in relation to a specific domain and for which an understanding has been developed, it provides the research with clarity. This would not be the case if terms were used interchangeably. It was felt that the terms used by Sayer, provide an understandable explanation of the linking between the three layers within CR. This is important to the study because the investigation is exploring how specific processes work within housing from a CR perspective. There are differences between the three layers about what is visible and what is hidden. At the level of the empirical, events that happen and their effects can be seen. Below the level of direct

observation, O'Mahoney and Vincent, identify that 'deeper levels awaiting discovery' for the CR researcher. Where there is no direct observation at the levels of the actual and the real, the author is looking to move away from the concrete to the abstract in order to theories about mechanisms at the level of the actual and structures at the level of the real. Figure 1 identifies the three layers, the aspects relating to each level, and the associated terms. The diagram uses a tree to illustrate how each level operates, what can be observed, and what is hidden.

Figure 1 has been adapted from the original to show that at the level of the actual, an additional line of vision has been put in to show that some causal mechanisms are hidden, and some are observable. In the original, the wall is higher, and the line of sight from the individual is above the wall, which identifies causal mechanisms as hidden. It identifies that at the level of the empirical, the branches of the tree, which are events that happen, can be directly observed. At the level of the actual, the middle of the tree trunk can be directly observed, but the lower part of the tree trunk is hidden and cannot be directly observed. Following this, some of the mechanisms that operate at this level and which generate events can be seen whereas others are hidden.



*Fig. 1. Three ontological levels in CR [19].*

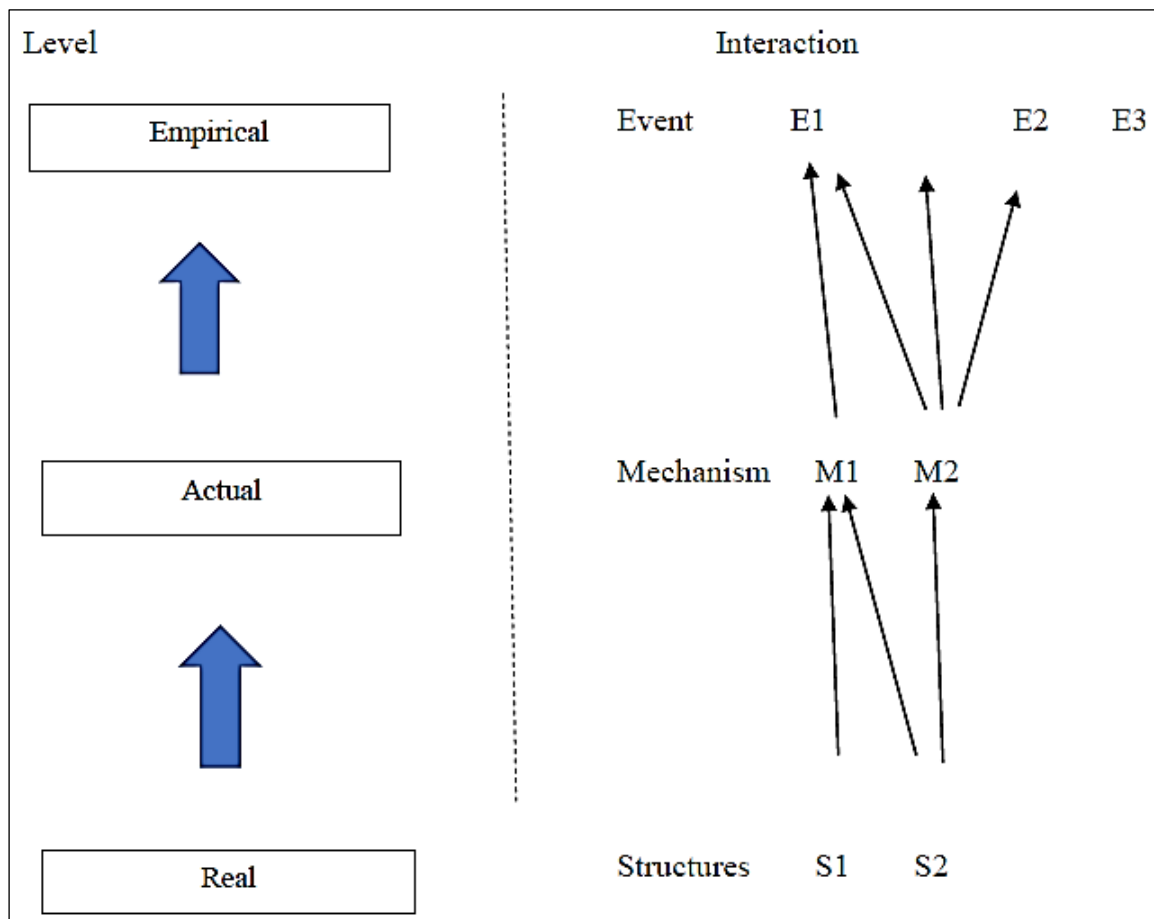
*Table 3. CR stratified ontology—two social housing examples.*

Level	Social Housing example: Homelessness	Social Housing example: Eviction	Observability
Empirical events that happen	Rough Sleeping	Moving out/Bailiffs attending	Directly Observable
Actual mechanisms that generate events	Leaving accommodation	Court dates	Directly Observable
	Asked to leave	Rent arrears	Not observable
Real structures within which mechanisms operate	Relationship breakdown	UC late payment	Not Observable
	Poverty	Welfare Reform	
	No job		
	No social structure		

At the level of the real, the roots of the tree, which are the structures in which mechanisms operate, are hidden and cannot be directly observed. To illustrate this further, Table 3 identifies two key situations in social housing in relation to each level and their observability.

In Table 3 at the level of the real, are presented the overall structure(s) that relate to the specific social housing example. These are hidden and are not observable. At the level of the actual, the mechanisms that cause events to happen

are graded with the ones higher up the list being directly observable and those lower in the list as being not observable. An example would be someone being asked to leave their accommodation could be observable, whereas the process of a relationship breakdown would not be. At the level of the empirical, the effects of the events that have happened are directly observable, a person sleeping rough or the bailiffs attending to an eviction. The relationship and interaction between the three layers are presented in Figure 2.



*Fig. 2. Relationship and interaction between the three layers [16, 17].*

On the left-hand side are identified the three ontological levels and, on the right-hand side, are exemplified different interactions that can occur between the levels. The diagram has been adapted by locating the three layers on the reader's left-hand next to alongside the diagrammatical representation from Sayer of the interaction between the layers. Arrows show the interaction between the different levels, and these can vary, such as one arrow going from M1 to E1, but three going from M2 to E1, E2, and E3. Figure 2 illustrates that one mechanism can trigger one or three events.

### **Causality and Causal Mechanisms**

Research that uses an historical approach to inquire into the social sciences is searching to gain an understanding of why events happen and why they happen in a certain way. In examining the reasons why an event

happened, and by trying to understand what caused it to happen, a process of inquiry about the nature of the causation about the event is set in motion. Causality refers to the 'causal processes, causal interactions, and causal laws' that help the researcher explain and 'understand why certain things happen' [34]. In the history of philosophical thought 'causality' and 'causation' have been worked on by philosophers, thinkers, and academics through time from Aristotle in Ancient Greece and Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages to Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Newton, Hume, Kant, and Mill in the contemporary era [35]. In this rich history, there is a wealth of understanding and a variety of views about 'causality' and 'causation' which have also been influenced by theological beliefs and the development of scientific inquiry. Sayer, states that 'causation has proved a particularly



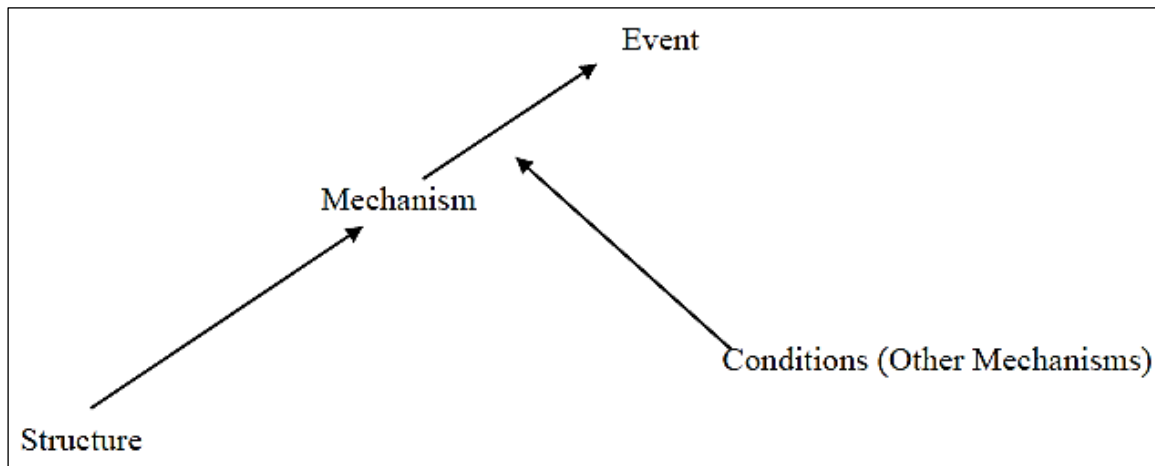
contentious concept in philosophy and several different versions of it form integral parts of competing philosophical positions. A few contemporary academics have tried to reduce the number of approaches to 'causality' as well as the core arguments behind them. Radulescu and Vessey [36] claimed that there were two different views of causality that have been advanced by academics, the Humean view, which explains causality through patterns and variables as well as the causal realist view which considers causality through underlying mechanisms and powers. Pawson [37] outlined three models of causality, secessionist, configurational, and generative. The Secessionist Model examines variables to identify causal agents and influences. The Configurational Model views the attributes of cases within a specific area to understand differences in outcomes. The generative Model acknowledges the role of mechanisms in causality. They are not measurable or visible as variables or attributes and are subject to the interactions of individuals from which outcomes emerge. There is alignment between the causal realist and generative positions. The generative concept of cause finds out how an event has been generated, how it happened and what conditions or factors enabled it to happen [38, 39].

Realist research endeavours to explore and understand how the different powers that objects have cause things to happen and how they do this rather than providing a descriptive explanation of the event, how it was caused, and the effect of this. As well as having causal powers, objects, and relations have liabilities that restrain them from doing things or acting in a certain way. The powers and liabilities that objects and relations can be enacted or may never be enacted. The way in which objects act is referred to in the literature as a mechanism. These are themselves subject to potential change as objects and

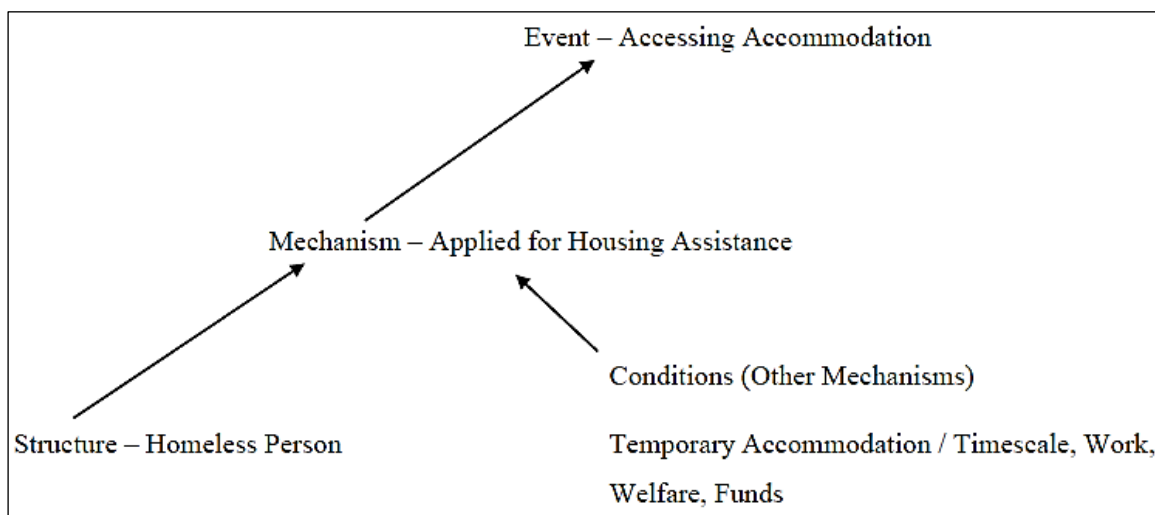
relations are affected by internal and external influences that can modify their powers and liabilities. In the field of housing this can be exemplified by the following: a house as a physical building can provide shelter, but this can change if the roof is removed or the building is burnt down; a person may lose their employment which will change their ability to pay rent; a person with a drug addiction may change their behaviour to come off drugs.

Causation through the triggering of a mechanism at the level of the actual that releases the powers of a structure (a group of objects) or an object at the level of the real is relational to the conditions of the specific situation and the impact of other mechanisms. Figure 3 highlights the CR view of causation and illustrates the triggered mechanism impacted by the conditions of the specific situation and as well as other mechanisms. Figure 4 illustrates an example from the practical application to the field of housing.

In Figure 4, the homeless person has the power to take steps to try and resolve their situation. They want to access accommodation because they need shelter and through applying for housing assistance, they can access accommodation. The causal power has been activated, and the homeless person has accessed accommodation. However, maintaining this shelter may depend on other conditions (short timescale) or other mechanisms (access to work, welfare, funds). In the case of situations in the social world, the subjective nature of conditions or other mechanisms means that it is difficult to predict what causes something to happen. According to Sayer, 'what causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening' but requires identification of the 'causal mechanisms and how they work and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions'.



*Fig. 3. CR view of causation [17].*



*Fig. 4. CR view of causation—a housing example.*

### **Relations: Necessary and Contingent**

Relations in CR are defined as being necessary (internal) and contingent (external) [40]. A necessary relation occurs when one object is dependent on the other. The 'relation between a landlord and tenant; the existence of one necessarily presupposes the other'. In a contingent relation, the object does not need to be in a necessary relation with another object. Easton, clarifies the difference between the two types of relations, 'entities can have some relations (necessary) that will affect one another and some (contingent) that may affect one another'. Both types of relation are important and can be present together.

Lawson claims that necessary relations are defined in the context of contingent relations. Sayer highlights that certain qualifications have to be acknowledged when looking at both types of relationship. He argued that within necessary relations, each entity can be seen individually, and although two or more entities are in a relationship, they are not defined by each other. Sayer, states that the entities in a necessary relationship can change, but not individually 'one part is tied to change in another'. Lawson asserts that necessary relations existing between a number of different entities in the housing system such as 'tenants to landlords, landowners to purchasers, borrowers to lenders, and



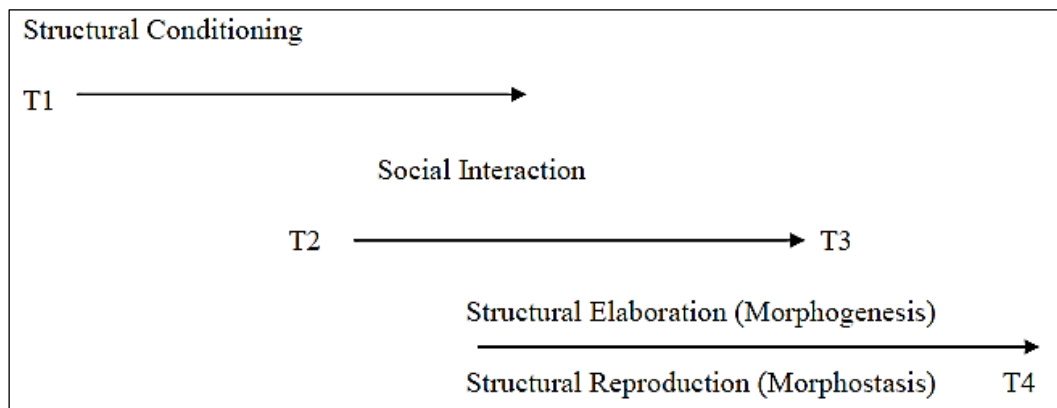
commissioners of projects to builders'. She was carrying out a comparative study of housing systems in Australia and the Netherlands to look at the 'causal mechanisms underlying housing networks over time and space'. In her study she outlined a cluster of necessary relations between social structures that underlie the housing network. Social structures are comprised of objects which have necessary relations, but which can have contingent relations with other objects. They can change with the impact of other relations on them through the release of powers or emergence of new phenomena. Structures can also exist within larger structures. Lawson compared the clusters underlying the housing networks in both countries in order to 'postulate, revise, and contrast clusters of causal mechanisms in different case studies, towards an explanation of difference'. Sayer claimed that there can be a difference in the importance of contingent relations in that some may be insignificant, and some may be important. Lawson, presented the contingent relations as equal, but by using Sayer's qualification approach, it can be said that they are not equal and that some are insignificant, and some are important. Sommerville [41] acknowledged the contribution that the work of Lawson had made in using a CR framework to analyze the broader housing systems in Australia and the Netherlands. He claimed that the distinction that Lawson had made between necessary and contingent relations was 'insufficiently clear,' that the 'concept of a (national) housing system' remained unanalyzed and questioned if 'it a realistic category or not?'. Sommerville goes on to critique CR itself. He questions if the CR approach enables the correct causes behind the activation of events to be identified or if it can help with the identification of 'what can count as the right (or wrong) contingent conditions'. Sommerville, goes

on to claim that CR is one of several different approaches to the identification of causes behind phenomena such as Path Dependency, Institutionalism (which he feels Lawson's approach is akin to). Within housing studies, CR has also been used to investigate the causation of homelessness [42]. CR has been suggested as an approach that can 'enable account to be taken of the full range of potential causal factors in homelessness and their necessary and contingent inter-relationships while avoiding making anyone level logically prior to all others. The experience of homelessness can happen to a person as the result of a combination of structural, contextual, or individual factors and emerge from the interaction of necessary and contingent relations. This discussion illustrates the contested area within which CR is located as a research method.

### **Emergence**

Sayer defines emergence as 'situations in which the conjunction of two or more features or aspects give rise to new phenomena'. Elder-Vass [43] states that the phenomena that emerge 'has properties or powers that are not possessed by its parts', but it cannot exist without its constituent parts. Mihata [44] illustrates this point through the concept of water, which has emergent properties that its constituent parts, hydrogen, and oxygen do not have. Theorists have held that phenomena emerge as their constituent parts become organized, and the relations between them become stable [45–47].

Archer examined emergence over time (morphogenesis) and the interplay between structure and agency. She illustrated the process by developing a cyclical model that highlights transformation and reproduction in three phases (structural conditioning, social interaction, and social elaboration) and is shown in Figure 5.



*Fig. 5. The basic morphogenetic cycle [10].*

In the model, structural conditioning at (T1) refers to structures that are already in existence at a point in time that are emergent and necessary outcomes resulting from the past actions of agents. Social interaction between structure and agency is represented between (T2) and (T3), which are points in time with the outcome being a transformation or reproduction of that structure. These outcomes are shown at point (T4) and labelled as structural elaboration (morphogenesis) and structural reproduction (morphostasis) by Archer [10].

## PART TWO: WHAT IS RESEARCH

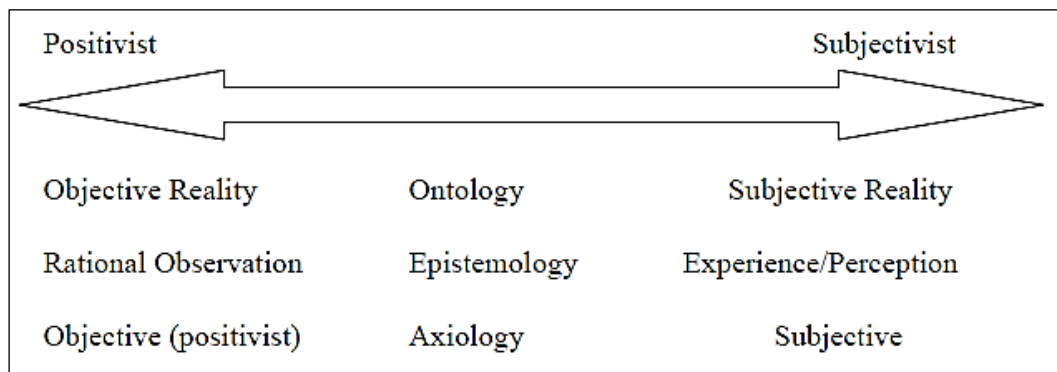
Research has been defined as ‘any form of disciplined enquiry that aims to contribute to a body of knowledge of theory’ [48] and by Mertens [49] as an investigation or enquiry into a subject. This research could be an inquiry into the natural world or into the social world. The research in this thesis is exploring the social world. New [50] identified that the researcher exploring the social world should be clear about their philosophical position as well as the ontology that they use. This part of the article identifies the philosophical approach used in the research and ontology of that philosophy.

### Knowledge and Philosophy

Before the time of Plato, knowledge has been studied by philosophers seeking to gain an understanding of the world.

Knowledge is ‘what is known,’ and the body of knowledge develops over time as new information, research findings, and new knowledge are added. Knight and Turnbull [51] suggest that there are relationships between knowledge and historical timescales as well as social, political, and cultural contexts. Furthermore, that these relationships impact upon the use and development of knowledge. The study of knowledge is called epistemology which comes from the Greek ‘ἐπιστήμη’ (epistími) (knowledge), and epistemologists look at the origin, nature, scope, and limits of knowledge [52, 53]. Together with epistemology, in philosophy, the two essential concepts of ontology and axiology are used. Ontology which comes from the Greek ‘ὄντο’ (to be) describes the nature of reality and axiology which comes from the Greek ‘ἀξία’ (value or worth) refers to the study of values and beliefs.

Philosophers, academics, and researchers have used these core concepts to adopt different philosophical positions concerning knowledge and reality. These philosophical positions range between two overall approaches positivism and subjectivism. The three philosophical concepts are shown in Figure 6 as arrows that are presented along a continuum between the positivist and subjectivist positions.



**Fig. 6.** Three philosophical concepts.

### Philosophical Approaches

Bryman [54] asserts that there are different views about the scope, range, ordering, and labelling of philosophical approaches. There are two main approaches underpinning philosophy, positivism and subjectivism. Holden and Lynch [55] have described these two approaches as ‘polar opposites’ on a continuum ‘with varying philosophical positions aligned between them’. Kulatunga et al. [56] claim that positivism acknowledges the objective reality of objects and events independent of the individual, and that subjectivism is where reality is perceived by the individual. Crotty indicates that the positivist understands the world by rational, systematic and empirically based processes but the subjectivist understands the world through the perception of the individuals who experience them, where ‘meaning is not discovered but constructed’. Positivism identifies that through observing phenomena, theories can be drawn up and predictions made about the world. This approach has been criticized for being a closed process which views causality as patterns of regularity between events or variables.

The development of knowledge in Europe has historically been driven by the positivist tradition with the subjectivist and realist approaches emerging later. Crotty describes positivism as ‘the march

of science’, which provided empirically based accurate knowledge about the world during the enlightenment (14th to the 18th centuries), replacing the belief-based understanding of the middle ages. The emergence of subjectivism and the sociology of knowledge in the 19th and 20th centuries is providing a balance to positivism to understand reality through the meanings constructed by people as they interpret the world and awareness of external objects assigns meaning rather than their existence. Commentators have advanced theoretical frameworks that have presented the relationship between positivism and subjectivism. Burrell and Morgan [57] developed the Subjective-Objective Dimension. Evelyn et al. [58] advanced the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum (Table 4) and Saunders et al. [59] proposed the Research Onion. The Subjective-Objective Dimension and Positivist Subjectivist Continuum frameworks are linear with positivism at one end of the line and subjectivism at the other end. Saunders et al. illustrate the relationship in a circular model with positivism at the top of the circle and subjectivism, which they label as pragmatism, at the bottom of the circle. Holden and Lynch, report that the labelling that is used for the philosophical approaches of positivism and subjectivism in these frameworks can be different.

**Table 4.** *The dimensions of three underlying philosophical approaches [58].*

Philosophical Approach	Positivism	Realism		Subjectivism
	<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Structural Realism</i>	<i>Critical Realism</i>	<i>Social Constructionism</i>
Ontological Assumption	Reality as a concrete structure	Reality as a concrete process	Reality as an interplay between a concrete structure and influenced by perception	Reality as a social construction
Methodology Type	Quantitative Empirical	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative and Qualitative	Qualitative
Data Collection	Experiments Surveys	Interactive interviews	Interactive interviews	Interviews / participant observation
Potential Interpretation	Generalization, inductive and deductively valid arguments Hypothetico-deductivist mode	Generalization, although does not allow contingent generalizations to be treated as necessary causal mechanism, hypothetico-deductivist mode	Abstraction and retroduction, generalization, although it does not allow contingent generalizations to be treated as necessary causal mechanisms. hypothetic deductive mode	No Generalization as there can be no universal truth
Example of Academic Housing Research	Study of non-profit housing, Kemeny et al. [60]	Theory of Housing provision, Ball and Harloe [61]	Explaining Homelessness, Fitzpatrick S [24]	Analysis of Housing Management—Franklin and Clapham [62]

Table 4 presents the dimensions of three underlying philosophical approaches looking at positivism, subjectivism, and realism. It has been adapted by focusing on the three philosophical approaches, taking out the characteristics in the first column of the original, and adding a column with an example of academic housing research for each approach. Identified in the table are ontological assumptions, methodological type, data collection methods, potential ways of interpretation, and an example for each one from academic housing research. Highlighted in the table are some of the differences between the philosophical approaches. Evely et al, state that these are ‘differences in what represents adequate knowledge, and different research strategies and methods used’. The realist approach occupies the middle ground on the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum between these two philosophical positions. Originating from the works of Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, the philosophy of realism has had a long history of development. Philosophers such as Comenius, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke,

Kant, and James have influenced the development of realism. Realism has been defined as a ‘philosophical doctrine which asserts the objective existence of universal concepts’ and ‘which defends that anything perceived by the senses has an independent existence of the thing perceived’ [63]. Saunders et al, note that the realist ontological perspective considers that there is a real-world in existence that is independent from the experiences of the individual and that it acknowledges both the positivist and subjectivist epistemological positions.

Putnam [64] has identified that the realist approach is wide-ranging, covering a number of positions and that there is not a single point of view. He has also said that the realist approach has also been criticized from a subjectivist standpoint for rejecting multiple realities of the world and the different perceptions that individuals have of the world. Mulaik [65] identified that it criticizes the focus that realism puts on causality as a concept in terms of their view on causal mechanisms. In Table 4, two philosophical

positions are identified as realist: structural realism and CR. Chakravarty [66] claims that structural realism combines beliefs in the positivist approaches of scientific theory that describe the world of physical objects and recognizes the social world as being subject to continual change. Yeung [67] advises that like structural realism, CR acknowledges the existence of a world of physical objects, but it also acknowledges the critical role that human perception plays.

### **PART THREE: REALISM IN HOUSING RESEARCH**

Research in housing studies interfaces with different discipline areas such as political science, geography, social sciences, economics, environment, and building technology. This is because it can require a combination of facts from these different discipline areas to explain phenomena about an aspect of housing that is being researched. Basset and Short [68] identified four types of approach within housing research, ecological, neo-classical, institutional, and Marxist. The ecological approach was defined as being linked to the broader field of human ecology, and this was exemplified by the work of Park et al. [69] who studied spatial patterns of residential structure in urban areas. The Neo-classical approach was defined as being linked to the wider field of neo-classical economics, and this was exemplified by the work of Alonso [70], who researched utility maximization regarding the use of land and consumer choice. The Institutional approach was defined as being linked to the wider field of Weberian sociology, and this was exemplified by the work of Pahl [71], who looked at housing managers as being gatekeepers to allowing access to housing. The Marxist approach was linked to the wider field of Marxism and exemplified through the work of Harvey [72], who looked at housing as a commodity and

Castells [73], who looked at the reproduction of labour power. These two texts were influential in bringing a new perspective into the analysis of problems within society. In 1872, Engels [74] wrote about housing within the context of a class struggle. This class struggle was about capitalist landlords making profits through the renting of property to the proletarian working classes in urban areas. Lawson declared that challenges to the dominance of social theories, in the late 1960s and 1970s manifested themselves in a more critical approach being taken by housing and urban social researchers to understand problems in society such as social inequality and conflict. Basset and Short, identify that during this time, housing studies began to emerge as an academic discipline. They say that it has evolved from the traditional perspective of being part of other academic disciplines such as sociology, urban, and political studies. Housing has historically been written about within the context of social relations, political issues, environmental, and economic conditions.

Realist researchers have examined the complex relationships between different actors and structures as well as between structures within housing systems. According to Lawson [75], realist housing researchers argue ‘that housing is not only subject to commodification but vulnerable to shifting circuits of capital, changing modes of social regulation and crises prone regimes of capital accumulation’. Researchers taking a realist approach, are seeking to explore the dynamics and effects of continual change within the complex relationships that exist within housing systems. During the 1980s and 1990s, several academic studies that examined the development of housing systems in Britain and other countries were undertaken [76–80]. Ball developed his model ‘The Structure of Housing



Provision' (TSHP), which explored the production, exchange, and commodification of housing in capitalist countries. He described the TSHP as 'a historically given process of providing and reproducing the physical entity, housing, focusing on the social agents essential to the process and the relations between them' [81]. Ball took the view that the academic studies that focused on the distribution of state subsidies to different types of tenure did not explain the whole housing system. He focused on the production and consumption of housing, not just as a physical process, but as a social one that is monopolized by the vested economic interests [82]. Ball included TSHP as part of an institutional analysis approach that assessed the influences of economics and power over time. During the 1980s, when TSHP was developed, a consumption-oriented approach to housing was dominant within the political and economic environment. The approach began to consider other social relations between social agents involved within the process who had previously been neglected. Ball, states that the identification of social agents involved in the 'production, allocation, consumption, and reproduction relations of housing' is important in analyzing the whole housing system. In his theory of structuration, Giddens [83], identified that structures have rules and procedures that shape the actions of a social agent who subsequently reproduces the structure. TSHP brings together an approach that explores the role of agents and their relations to the structures within those housing systems.

In the 1990s, Ambrose developed the chain of provision framework, which examined the roles of the different agents who were engaged in the housing system. Ambrose also developed a model that illustrated the shift in power in the

provision of housing from the state to the market. Lawson, states that the state sector is characterized as being 'democratic, responsive to need and allocating on this basis', but the market is 'undemocratic, responsive to effective demand and allocating based on capacity to pay'. There has been interplay between state intervention and the forces of the free market in the provision of housing during the late 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Different theories have been advanced by researchers to understand these changes to housing systems. Harloe [84], developed a theory of convergence that identified different phases of mass and residual housing provision, which were linked to changes in capitalism in the 20th century. Kemeny [85] developed a theory of divergence that examined the role of the state in intervening in rental markets. As well as the relationship between the state and the market, other structural aspects and factors contribute to the development of housing systems such as the availability of land and finance. According to Lawson, when trying to research those factors, it can be difficult to 'isolate, observe or measure' them. Furthermore, she asserts that the philosophy of CR can help do this by providing 'an ontological theory for abstracting causal mechanisms that can emerge from the realm of dominant ideas, material resources, and social relations, which are contended to underlie forms of housing provision'. The application of CR to aspects of the housing system can illuminate the specific mechanisms at work and it offers to explore beneath the surface. This philosophy has been crucial because it enabled the research to consider the context relating to each SHP to understand what has caused certain things to happen and under what circumstances have SHPs undertaken a specific course of action. Although SHPs are facing similar challenges within their operational environment the specific range of factors



relating to each organization will be different. The CR philosophical approach helps to separate and identify these factors.

### **Housing Research: CR vs Social Constructionism**

The discipline of housing studies, Jacobs et al. [86] suggest, started to develop during the latter part of the 20th century when positivist and empirical approaches that used an evidence-based policy analysis approach were dominant. Somerville and Bengtson [87] claim that in the last 20 years, more theoretically based approaches have been employed by housing researchers, and social constructionism has become dominant within housing studies. Jacobs et al, view social constructionism as a broad paradigm within which in research with different emphasis can be accommodated. Clapham [88] has claimed that the traditional approach of the housing researcher has been challenged in recent years because of the change that has occurred in society. The complex nature of some of the housing issues facing researchers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has required the employment of a range of methodological and philosophical approaches. Gibb and Marsh [89] highlighted this when they wrote a paper on the use of a systems thinking approach which provides the researcher with 'an array of useful concepts, mental models and modes of thinking that can inform and help structure housing policy and strategy development'.

Social constructionism has a long research tradition within the social sciences and encompasses different perspectives, including discourse analysis, sociological, and symbolic interactive approaches. Jacobs et al, state that the range of perspectives employed by housing researchers increased and this has 'extended' the understanding beyond 'the

confines of the 'state versus market narrative to cover areas generally perceived to be within the domain of cultural geography, ethnography, and social anthropology'. Fopp [90] has suggested that housing researchers employ different approaches in their work because they want to gain a greater understanding of the problems being investigated. This greater understanding involves an exploration of the causes behind these problems and the experiences of people who face them. Jacobs and Manzi [91] state that the social constructionist epistemology views the experience that an individual has as 'an active process of interpretation rather than a passive material apprehension of an external physical world'. King [92] points out that social constructionism has been criticized for upholding a relativist view of knowledge. Woolgar and Pawluch [93] labelled social constructionism as 'ontological gerrymandering' where the researcher manipulates the boundaries between perception and what is real. Jacobs et al, state that social constructionism 'denies the existence of an objective material world'. However, Collin [94] asserts that social constructionists argue that 'their perception of the material world is affected by the way we think and talk about it, by our consensus about its nature, by the way, we explain it to each other, and by the concepts we use to grasp it'. Cruikshank [95] views social constructionism as 'a broad tradition' and claims that social constructionists take 'a negative approach based on scepticism' where knowledge claims are 'constructions of reality that are imbued with power'.

The view that everything is a social construct has been challenged because of its 'subjective nature' which restricts engagement in research 'with the possibility of gathering evidence about the

real world [96]. Jacobs and Manzi [97] have adopted a social constructionist position which views reality as a social construct but also recognizes to a limited extent, the idea of an objective material reality. King labelled this position as 'weak' social constructionism compared to a 'strong' more radical version. Taylor identified that the strong form of social constructionism 'can be critiqued' for ignoring aspects of the objective world that cannot be explained as social constructs such as 'a volcano exploding'. Fopp, stated that the weak position was more meaningful to housing research because 'some objects can be socially constructed and others not'. Somerville [98] alleges that to challenge the increasing dominance of the strong version of social constructionism that was permeating housing studies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, realist approaches were promoted by housing academics. Lawson, states that in the last 20 years, researchers 'have had to confront a plurality of influential factors or causes which have generated differences in housing systems' and 'are not easy to isolate, observe or measure'. They have looked to CR as a philosophical approach that helps researchers to understand problems by exploring their causes by investigating the structures and mechanisms that lie beneath the phenomena that they are studying. Taylor views that CR offers the researcher 'a way for the researcher to engage fully in exploring the real world and the social world'.

## CONCLUSION

This article looks at the philosophy of CR as one that can be used by researchers in the field of housing studies. The philosophy provides an approach that can be adapted to a research project and used as a tool to analyze the phenomena being studied. Housing studies has developed into a strong academic discipline since the

1970s and encompasses a wealth of ongoing research. Housing is something that is experienced by most people and is an ongoing 'live' operational phenomena. The field of housing studies cuts across other academic areas of study such as sociology and areas of 'lived' experience within society including work and welfare. One of the purposes in undertaking research into different phenomena is to explore that phenomena and investigate issues behind it. Through its stratified ontological approach CR enables the researcher to look behind phenomena at the structures and mechanisms that influence, drive and determine actions as well as issues that emerge from them. The article is divided into three parts and the philosophy of CR is presented in the first part. The second part of the article looks at what research is, and the last part examines the tradition of realist philosophy in housing research. It is argued that within this tradition CR offers the housing researcher a positive way to develop their research. There are examples within the wider housing research literature of the application of CR, but they are few and the depth of application is often limited.

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